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Interrogating Michel Foucault's counter-conduct:

Theorising the subjects and practices of resistance in

global politics

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Abstract:

Resistance, and its study, is on the rise: visible and politically discernible practices of dissent against sovereignty and economic exploitation, such as protesting, agitating and occupying have received increased analytical attention in the past decade. This special issue provides much needed systematic attention to *less* visible practices of resistance or those not manifested in expressly political registers. It focuses on attempts to inventively modify, resist or escape the ways in which we are governed by interrogating critically the politics and ethics of resistance to 'power that conducts', expressed through Foucault's notion of 'counter-conduct.' The contributions first, theoretically interrogate, develop, and refine the concept of 'counter-conduct(s)', offering a major statement its importance for both the study of resistance and also its place in Foucault's work. Second, they provide inter/multi-disciplinary empirical investigations of counter-conduct in numerous thematic areas and spaces of global politics. Third, they explicitly reflect on variable and contingent forms of counter-conduct, examining its close relationship with conducting power. Finally, the special issue concertedly considers issues of methodology and method emerging from the study of counter-conduct and how these also recalibrate the study of governing power itself.

Resistance, and its study, is on the rise. Protesting, agitating, dissenting, and occupying, *inter alia*, have received increased analytical attention and theorisation in the past tumultuous decade.¹ However, much of this academic and public attention has tended to focus nearly exclusively on the visible and politically discernible practices of dissent² against the excesses of sovereignty, worsening economic exploitation, and increasingly diverse instances of dispossession and other forms of oppression.³ Less visible practices of resistance or those who do not participate in an expressly political register against the state and/or the market deserve greater systematic attention, and to this end, this special issue brings together humanities and social science scholarship to interrogate those inventive attempts to resist or escape the ways in which we are governed within, or outside, expressly political dissenting practice aimed at the state and/or the market.⁴

This special issue addresses itself to a critical interrogation and assessment of the politics and ethics of resistance to ‘power that conducts’ expressed primarily through the notion of ‘counter-conduct.’⁵ The collected articles undertake novel excursions towards a critical theorisation of this concept, expanding its original, and doubt-ridden, formulation by Michel

¹ Louise Amoore (ed.) *The Global Resistance Reader* (London: Routledge, 2005); Lara Montesinos Coleman and Karen Tucker (eds) *Situating Global Resistance: Between Discipline and Dissent* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); Donatella Della Porta and Sidney Tarrow (eds) *Transnational Protest and Global Activism* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (Princeton: PUP, 2012).

² Asef Bayat, ‘From “Dangerous Classes” to “Quiet Rebels”’: Politics of the Urban Subaltern in the Global South’, *International Sociology*, Vol. 15, no. 3 (September 2000), pp. 533–57.

³ Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, 1 edition (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013).

⁴ Michel Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1 July 1982): 777–95, doi:10.2307/1343197.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Foucault, as well as its more recent discussion in certain philosophical circles.⁶ Moreover, the contributions offer original and multi-disciplinary empirical investigations of practices and interventions of resisting conduct by diverse – political, economic, individual and collective – subjects within the often very local contexts of global politics, economics, culture and society. Taking inspiration from Arnold Davidson’s recent praise of ‘counter-conduct’ as that crucial concept, the “*hinge*,” “that allows us to link together the political and ethical axes of Foucault’s thought,”⁷ the contributors to this special issue work towards four interconnected aims.

The contributions, firstly, theoretically develop, refine and critically interrogate the concept of ‘counter-conduct(s)’. Noting that this term has, until recently, received scant attention within the social sciences, contributors offer a major statement of the importance of the concept for both the study of resistance and its place in Foucault’s work. During the spring of 1978, in his lecture course entitled “Security, Territory, Population,” Foucault was to reflect in detail on the “specific revolts of conduct”⁸ that arose in response to the pastoral direction, regulation and incitement of conduct, captured by the phrase “*conduire des conduits*,” or, conduct of conduct.⁹ After considering and rejecting other terms such as resistance, dissidence, revolt, insubordination and disobedience, he settles on the awkward term ‘counter-conduct’ to refer to the “struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others”.¹⁰ In a lecture delivered at the Sorbonne on 27 May 1978 Foucault observed that the

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, trans. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007); Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, op. cit.; Arnold I. Davidson, ‘In Praise of Counter-Conduct’, *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 24, no. 4 (October 2011), p. 26.

⁷ Davidson, ‘In Praise of Counter-Conduct’, op. cit., p. 26.

⁸ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, op. cit., 194.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) p. 237. The phrase is often cited to the English translation of ‘Subject and Power’ but does not actually appear as such. See, Michel Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, no. 4 (July 1982), pp. 789–90.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, op.cit., p. 201.

rise of the question of government – how to be governed – in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was accompanied by the question of how *not* to be governed?¹¹

Importantly, as the collected articles illuminate in different ways, counter-conduct did not necessarily require a rejection of government in general; rather, the emergence of counter-conduct signals rather “a perpetual question”, found in the very “preoccupation about the way to govern and the search for the ways to govern”, which asked, “how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them.”¹² “Counter-conductive struggles,” then, may not explicitly “look for the ‘chief enemy’ but for the immediate enemy”, not always the state as governor *par excellence*, but governors in the plural, resulting in attempts to resist, escape and “*involute*” rationalities and *technes* of conduct, or “the art of not being governed quite so much.”¹³ That counter-conduct exceeds direct opposition or rejection, and needs to be theorised in often apparently ‘apolitical’ settings, is shown in a number of contributions. Indeed, albeit in differing ways, the collected articles by Kazi on the genealogy of anxiety with leadership in global governance, by Rossdale and Stierl in various occupy campaigns, and Odysseos on counter-conduct through human rights highlight the impossibility of drawing clear distinctions between power and resistance, governance and insubordination, discipline and liberation.

In taking up these questions, which remained exploratory for Foucault, the articles also undertake an incessant critique, modification, indeed, a critical *development*, of his attempts to understand subjects’ inventive, but always invigilated, practices of counter-conduct.

¹¹ Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, op. cit., p. 44.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, op. cit., p. 45. In contrast, see James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

Malmvig, example, wishes to expand our purview of this ‘hinge’ term through a discussion of creative visual practices of counter-conduct in the Syrian Uprising that escape the logocentric ground of other approaches to vocal and/or perlocutionary attempts at resistance to sovereign power or market forces. Sokhi-Bulley, moreover, tests the limits of the term with regard to questions of intentionality, reflection and politicization, drawing on the 2011 UK riots to ask whether the rioting individual is performing a care of the self in trying to exist better within her society, and what challenges this presents to our understanding of the political, rights-bearing subject. Odysseos, additionally, examines the possibilities for counter-conduct as it occurs through, and *within*, human rights, in the very interstices of claims against both the state and the market.¹⁴ Connections and tensions between Foucault’s concerns in the 1970s with governmentality and counter-conduct, and his increasing interest in ethical issues and concepts like ‘care of the self’ and frank truth-speaking, or *parrēsia*, are explored in depth in the articles by Siisiäinen and Death.

A second aim of these collected articles is to provide concerted empirical, interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary investigations of counter-conduct in a variety of thematic areas and spaces of global politics. The contributors undertake their analyses of counter-conduct as a term, its location within Foucault’s broader *corpus*, and its empirical manifestations, from within multiple and interacting disciplinary sites such as anthropology, history, international relations and political economy, philosophy, political science, and law. Asking, as Foucault was to insist, “The little question, What happens?”, is far from “flat and empirical”; on the contrary, it works to eschew “a metaphysics or an ontology of power,” aiding rather the “critical investigation into the thematics of power” and its resistance.¹⁵ Attesting to the depth of commitment the special issue makes to inter- and multi-disciplinary research, Demetriou

¹⁴ See, for example, Jack Donnelly, ‘The Relative Universality of Human Rights’, *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 29, no. 2 (2007), pp. 281–306.

¹⁵ Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, *op. cit.*, p. 786.

for example, examines the analytical specificity of counter-conduct within ‘the everyday’ by drawing on critical anthropological thinking to challenge philosophy’s founding identification of everydayness with inauthenticity and averageness.¹⁶ Several papers critically assess varied manifestations of the Occupy movements, drawing on cultural geography, political economy, and political science, including Bulley on the urban spaces of the London Occupy movement, Rossdale and Stierl on the power relations within the US-based and London Occupy movements, and Death on Occupy in South African townships. Nişancioğlu and Pal, furthermore, reflect explicitly on the limits of counter-conduct as an exclusive framework for understanding the production and governing of UK academics and students, encouraging the critical supplementation of discussions of conduct and counter-conduct with a political economy of immaterial labour to analyse the contemporary ‘University factory’ through the Occupy Sussex campaign. While some contributors tackle pressing contemporary issues in the practice of resistance, others trace longer historical processes of constitution of their areas of focus. Kazi returns to Early Modern religious and political thought to offer a genealogical account of contemporary anxieties about leadership as attempts to escape the direction of pastoral power. Drozynski draws upon architectural literatures to show how built environments have historically facilitated both conduct and counter-conduct, drawing on the example of the city of Nowa Huta designed to concretise Soviet ideology into living in pre-1989 Poland.

Thirdly, the special issue explicitly reflects on the variable and contingent forms of counter-conduct, examining its close relationship with conducting power and revealing the processes of invigilation of resistance and adjustment of conducting strategies. Several of the contributions use the lens of counter-conducts to diagnose and critique prevailing forms of

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

power. Bulley shows how advanced liberalism conducts the movement and spatiality of populations through urban geography, and the subversion of this by Occupy camps which produce their own forms of counter-circulation and immobility. Death's article uses South African youth movements to show how counter-cultural practices work to subvert dominant ways of being which are often framed in terms of ever-increasing conspicuous consumption, distantly echoing Foucault's interest in ascetic religious movements which went against the grain of pastoral Christianity.¹⁷ Siisiäinen draws upon queer theory to underline the fundamental importance of relationship and togetherness, as well as an affective dynamics of traversal, penetration, confusion, and contagion, in studying the differences between 'gay counter-conduct' and care of the self. Kazi undertakes a diagnosis of the leadership anxiety pervading both contemporary institutions of global governance, and the so-called anti-globalization movements against bodies like the WTO, G8, and G20.

Finally, the special issue concertedly considers what issues of methodology and method emerge in the study of counter-conduct and how these may also facilitate a return to the study of power itself. Odysseos in particular revisits Foucault's broader methodological orientations regarding the study of governmental and disciplinary power and offers a recalibration of these that reflect more adequately the 'originary' and co-emergent incitement of counter-conduct as ethical self-transfiguration, which in her work can be seen through the use of human rights in struggles against neoliberal disposability.¹⁸ Malmvig explores the methodological issues raised in the study of visual counter-conducts, and proposes an analytical framework that allows for a study of more subtle, creative and marginal forms of

¹⁷ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, op. cit., p. 204.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, 'Two Lectures', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), pp. 78–108; on ethical self-formation, see also, Louisa Cadman, 'How (not) to Be Governed: Foucault, Critique, and the Political', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 28, no. 3 (2010), pp. 539–56; Mitchell Dean, "'A Social Structure of Many Souls': Moral Regulation, Government, and Self-Formation', *Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie*, Vol. 19, no. 2 (1994), p.145.

visual counter-conduct in Syria since 2011. In very different contexts, both Bulley and Drozynski examine the roles of cities as sites of conduct and counter-conduct, whose architectural forms, flows and relations of production and consumption function as laboratories of conduct, whereas for Nişancıoğlu and Pal it is the university campus that shapes acceptable behaviours in particular ways. Together, such reflections rigorously enhance future analyses of counter-conduct and especially highlighting the need for constant attention to the ambivalent and mutually constitutive relationship between conduct and counter-conduct.

In these four ways the special issue establishes the concept of counter-conduct as crucial for analysing more subtle, complex and often ambivalent forms of resistance to prevalent forms of governmentality. Moreover, it promotes a systematic focus on practices and subjects of counter-conduct lacking in social science analyses to date. There is much at stake in such critical research, for both the scholarly theorisation of resistance and even perhaps for on-going practices of insubordination and insurrection in contemporary global politics. Just as Foucault envisioned that his attention to power as productive required “several critical shifts in relation to the supposition of a fundamental power”,¹⁹ the thinking of counter-conduct, as the special issue illuminates, signals the need for critical shifts in our presuppositions regarding resistance and its study. For Bulley, the stakes include the ways in which new forms of community and belonging are brought into being through unruly conduct, and Rossdale and Stierl show how even the new political spaces opened up by practices of counter-conduct are structured by continued forms of hierarchy and exclusion. Death highlights the important contribution the concept of counter-conduct can make to social movement theory, as well as pushing the long-established analytics of government beyond a

¹⁹ Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, *op. cit.*, p. 788.

mere description of the micro-practices of neo-Gramscian disciplinary power. The future of the university is at stake in academic counter-conducts for Nişancioğlu and Pal, whereas for Odysseos it is the status of human rights themselves as both transgressive and governing technologies. Cultural and aesthetic modes of relation – how we engage with each other as emotional and affective beings – are the stakes for Malmvig and Siisiäinen.

Finally, the special issue as a whole seeks to engender further debate and consideration of the role of counter-conduct in the development of Foucaultian and broader critical theory. As this special issue demonstrates, counter-conduct is at the core of what critique means in a Foucaultian sense. As Thomas Lemke argues “The activity of problematization, the art of voluntary insubordination and the audacity to expose oneself as a subject ... are the three elements that define critical activity according to Foucault.”²⁰ At the same time, expanding critical activity through the introduction of counter-conduct opens up critique to ethics in productive and interesting ways. A systematic and rigorous engagement with counter-conduct inflects Foucault’s wider intellectual project as centred around the ethical. If “the notion of counter-conduct adds an explicitly ethical component to the notion of resistance,”²¹ we propose that the study of counter-conduct is itself an intellectual and ethical practice of subject formation, and is crucial to the different selves we seek to become.

²⁰ Thomas Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique Cultural Politics & the Promise of Democracy* (Boulder, Colo: Paradigm, 2011), p. 24.

²¹ Davidson, ‘In Praise of Counter-Conduct’, op. cit., p. 28.